



## THE PENINSULA CORRIDOR PLAN



Creating Vibrant  
Livable Communities...  
Linking Housing, Transit  
and Public Spaces

Belmont Station Area  
BELMONT, CALIFORNIA  
OCTOBER 2003



**Prepared for**

San Mateo County Economic Development Association (Samceda) / Peninsula Policy Partnership (P<sup>3</sup>)

San Mateo County Transit District (samTrans)

The County of San Mateo

The City of Belmont

**Prepared by**

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The City of Belmont

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Map showing cities participating in the Peninsula Corridor Plan as of 2003.



# INTRODUCTION

## Countywide Issues

A decade of increasing transit ridership and improving levels of transit service suggests that Peninsula communities are ripe for a revitalization of downtown living. Adding housing around transit centers may be part of the solution to the acute housing crisis and support efforts to revitalize downtowns all along the corridor. Often dominated by parking lots, wide streets, and underutilized properties, the areas around these Caltrain and BART stations and SamTrans bus stops represent enormous unmet potential as centers of community activity that will increase transit ridership and reduce traffic congestion.

A new approach is required to unleash this potential—one that cuts through traditional bureaucratic and administrative barriers and taps the creative visions of local communities. Building on their strategic plan, "Moving from Talk to Action," Samceda and Peninsula Policy Partnership (P3) have joined together with SamTrans-Caltrain to work with communities in San Mateo County to identify problems and opportunities for enlivening the downtown districts around their transit facilities. The regional initiative targets communities along the rail corridor—the area bounded by El Camino Real and Highway 101. It parallels and complements SamTrans' collaboration with the City-County Association of Governments of San Mateo County (C-CAG) to develop the Countrywide Transportation Plan 2010.

The process used to facilitate the regional initiative is guided by Project for Public Spaces, Inc. (PPS), and begins by bringing together diverse parties with an interest in these station areas to identify problems, share plans, create a vision, and go forward collaboratively to achieve that vision. Because these areas typically have overlapping jurisdictions, stakeholders often include the city government and staff, private sector representatives, merchants, property owners, and residents from the communities, along with representatives from SamTrans-Caltrain, BART, and Caltrans, which operate the transportation facilities along the peninsula corridor.

Through a participatory and interactive planning process, an overall "Placemaking" strategy for upgrading the areas around or near transit stations is developed to help provide a framework for implementation of both short- and long-term improvements by the local community, which later can be formalized into planning guidelines and regulations that steer future decision-making by the transportation agencies. The participatory Placemaking strategy's recommendations—including improvements that can be made immediately and at relatively low cost—all aim to create people-friendly urban destinations, with mixed uses and gathering places.

## Project Background

The San Mateo Peninsula and surrounding communities experienced a time of tremendous prosperity during the tech boom, the benefits of which included economic growth, low unemployment, and burgeoning personal and state government budgets. But the Peninsula also suffered some negative impacts of this prosperity: communities throughout the County have experienced increased traffic congestion, air pollution, and a near nonexistent and prohibitively expensive housing stock. Local school districts, law enforcement and fire protection agencies, hospitals, and professional trades have reported that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain quality employees because of these problems. Similarly, companies upon whose success the County's economic prosperity depended began to report that many of their employees were no longer willing to commute for hours a day from and to their homes in other parts in and around the Bay Area.

Since the tech bubble burst, housing prices haven't fallen, while office space has become increasingly cheaper. As a result, the County and the cities along the corridor, casting about for sources of revenue and yet barred by Proposition 13 from acquiring it from personal property taxes, have, understandably, largely ignored the housing crisis in favor of zoning for the construction of "big box" retail establishments and hotels. Because of this, those who succeed in finding places to live are becoming an increasingly rarefied lot; this will have a detrimental effect on the County's economy.

Even before the "dot bomb," in August 2000, Samceda and the P3 formed a partnership to develop Countywide consensus among local residents, business leaders, government officials, and transportation, housing, environmental, and planning experts on a strategic plan that comprehensively addresses the fundamental transportation, land use, housing, and economic needs of the Peninsula. Building on the strategic plan, "Moving from Talk to Action," Samceda-P3 have joined SamTrans to work with communities in San Mateo County to create consensus among local community leaders and the public to create a strategic plan which addresses transportation, land use/housing and economic needs of the Peninsula. SamTrans, as both the regional transit provider and managing partner of Caltrain, contracted for the services of Project for Public Spaces because of the organization's holistic approach to the issues of concern. The name of this plan is the "Peninsula Corridor Plan".

The plan's goal of creating vibrant livable communities which link housing transit and public spaces dovetails an effort being undertaken by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans)-Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS), the policy initiative to better address the natural, cultural, and built environments around State roads. The transportation community is turning its attention to local communities and the linkage between land uses and the transportation systems that connect them and the need to re-instate America's main streets on the state highway system.

For years, context insensitive solutions were applied to main streets across the United States as state Departments of Transportation (DOTs) widened them to the point that they no longer served as comfortable, walkable shopping streets; sidewalks were narrowed, on-street parking removed, and street trees replaced with asphalt. In the last few years, though, the Federal Highway Administration and several state DOTs have become increasingly interested in flexible, context-sensitive, and dual-purpose projects. Focus is shifting away from just the roadway, bus stop, or sidewalk to how transportation facilities can help make places more economically stable, safer, and more productive. This is a more synergistic approach than the one that has traditionally been used, one that sees transportation as part of a greater whole rather than as just an end in and of itself.

Caltrain and SamTrans are also taking this synergistic approach. Caltrain has experienced 50% growth in ridership over the last five years, and has increased its level of service from 60 to 80 trains on weekdays. It has also been improving its infrastructure with new stations in San Francisco, San Mateo, Hayward Park, Belmont, San Carlos, Redwood City, Menlo Park, and Mountain View; grade separations in South San Francisco (Oyster Point), Millbrae, Belmont, San Carlos, Redwood City, and 5th Avenue in the past five years; and new or rebuilt track, grade crossings, signals, and bridges along the corridor. In the future, Caltrain expects to experience a further increase in ridership due to additional population growth, improvements to the level of service and economic expansion.

## The PPS Placemaking Approach

Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit technical assistance, research, and educational organization. PPS's mission-to create and sustain public places that build communities-is achieved through programs in parks, plazas, and central squares; transportation; public buildings and architecture; and

*The Place Diagram, showing the key attributes, intangibles, and measurables of place.*



public markets. Since its founding in 1975, the organization has worked in over 1,000 communities, within the United States and abroad, helping people grow their public spaces into vital and distinctive community places that are well integrated into the community fabric and enrich people's experience of public life. PPS considers public spaces to include the many areas that the public uses in common, indoors and out, in public or private ownership; among these are streets, parks, plazas, and their surrounding environments, as well as entire downtowns and neighborhood districts.

To ensure that a public space fulfills its potential for increasing community- and environmental-friendliness, PPS has, for the past 27 years, emphasized Placemaking, a methodology to create places on a human scale that respond to community needs, that feel safe and comfortable-especially to families and the elderly-and that are conducive to community gathering. PPS's Placemaking process allows diverse constituencies to identify how a public space can be reshaped to make it a welcome, well functioning, and attractive place for people. Our approach to Placemaking is based on its belief that it is not enough simply to develop design ideas and elements to improve or develop a public space. Improvements need to reflect community values and needs. We believe that a public involvement process that defines and responds to community conditions and needs from the outset is one of the most critical factors in achieving a public space that is truly sensitive to its context.

Thus, Placemaking, as PPS approaches it, must begin with a thorough understanding of the dynamics, desires, and conditions within a community. It involves observation and research and listening to the people in a community about its problems and aspirations. PPS staff work with community members to create a vision around the places they view as important to community life and to their daily experience; and they help them implement their ideas beginning with short-term, often experimental improvements that enable them to gain momentum and arrive at truly appropriate and lasting solutions.

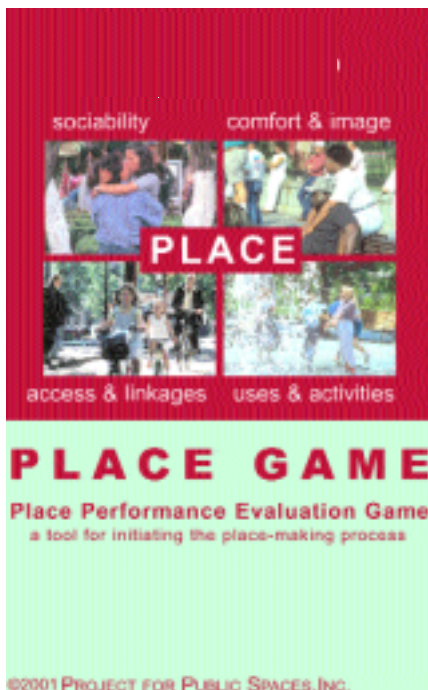
## The Place Performance Evaluation Game

As part of its visualization process, PPS often uses its Place Performance Evaluation Game®. This place-oriented approach to community improvement and involvement relies on common sense and intuition along with structured PPS observation and interview techniques for a quick and productive site assess-



ment. By participating in this "game," participants get to know each other better and gain new insights into ways to look at downtowns, streets, and other public space environments. They also learn to view the areas within these spaces more holistically and to see their potential as meaningful "places" in communities. Highly trained professionals and laypeople alike can conduct the evaluation—equally dramatic results are achievable by both groups. Also, the "game" is easily adaptable for use as part of a public meeting or community workshop.

The workshop takes place in the vicinity of the sites being evaluated, so that participants have easy access to them. The workshop participants are divided into groups and instructed in how to complete the Place Performance Evaluation Game®, which uses a special form created by PPS for the purpose. Participants then return to the training session venue for a breakout discussion of observations from each study site visit, and both short- and long-term recommendations are presented to the larger group session.



Evaluate the Place			
<b>Comfort &amp; Image</b>	POOR	FAIR	GOOD
Attractive	1	2	3
Feels Safe	1	2	3
Clean/Well Maintained	1	2	3
Conducive to use by all	1	2	3
Comfort & Image average rating (sum/3): _____			
<b>Access &amp; Linkages</b>	POOR	FAIR	GOOD
Interchangeable Use & Activities	1	2	3
"Walkable"	1	2	3
Access to Transit	1	2	3
Clear Directional Signage	1	2	3
Access & Linkages average rating (sum/4): _____			
<b>Uses &amp; Activities</b>	POOR	FAIR	GOOD
Rich & Diverse Land Use	1	2	3
Supports Diverse Uses/Activities	1	2	3
Area is busy	1	2	3
Area is safe & secure	1	2	3
Uses & Activities average rating (sum/4): _____			
<b>Sociability</b>	POOR	FAIR	GOOD
People in groups	1	2	3
People are comfortable	1	2	3
People are polite and respectful	1	2	3
People are aware of others and generous	1	2	3
Sociability average rating (sum/4): _____			
Overall rating: (sum/average rating)			

**Identify Opportunities**

A. What do you like best about the place?

B. List three things that you would do to improve this place that make sense right away and that are realistic over a year.

C. What three changes would you make in the long run that would have the biggest impact?

D. How do you see the place in the future? What do you see it and what do you see it to become in 10 years?

E. What do all participants or local leaders see you identify that could help implement one or more projects and improve the area? Please list as specific as possible.

The Place Performance evaluation form.



*These are the Places and Urban Design Committee's vision initial themes for areas of downtown Belmont, developed during the Place Evaluation Workshops held in June 2003.*

## BELMONT CALTRAIN STATION AREA

Belmont's Village Center and its centrally located Belmont Caltrain Station have both seen many improvements in recent years. In fact, this study was ideal to illustrate how Placemaking strategies can help pull together the many positive, but parallel initiatives currently being spearheaded by Samtrans/Caltrain, private developers, merchants, and a variety of City departments. Moreover, this study created an opportunity for the City to work collaboratively with Caltrans and SamTrans to identify specific ways that all can continue to work together in the future.

Much has already been accomplished in recent years to redevelop the downtown and transform it into a vibrant community center. These enhancements include a new grade separated station with new platforms and parking lots, an expansion of City Hall, plans for a new library, and a series of private developments, including the completed Safeway supermarket, the Ralston Plaza project, a non-profit conflict mediation center, and the much anticipated Atrium project.

In 2004, the City of Belmont will begin to update its General Plan, which will specify what the City plans to encourage in the future in terms of downtown, open space, industrial areas, and land use, and will determine the capital expenditures to be made under the City's capital program starting in 2007. To kick off this process, the City hired a consultant to facilitate a city-wide visioning process. The results of this community visioning process, conducted by seven committees (Community Connections, Economic Development, Youth and Education, Neighborhoods and Open Spaces, The Arts, History, Place and Urban Design) from July through September 2003, with input solicited from many hundreds of residents, represents the first step in a longer term planning process to transform Belmont into "an ever more thriving oasis" in the San Mateo Peninsula. These seven committees were charged with "explore[ing] what Belmont is today, what trends are likely to influence its future, what values we share, and what we want our community to look like in twenty years."

The Peninsula Corridor Plan (PCP) project work in Belmont was structured so that it would contribute significantly to the City's overall vision planning work, in addition to identifying issues and opportunities for key areas located within one half mile of the Belmont train station. The PCP initiative in Belmont also was crafted to provide specific recommendations to be considered as part of the City's 2004 General Plan Update.

PPS worked directly with the Places and Urban Design Visioning Committee to outline a series of strategies for: enhancing Belmont's village atmosphere and small town feel; transforming the car dominated village center into a real walkable downtown with a mix of uses and destinations; creating a sense of connectivity, linkage and cohesiveness - among the neighborhoods, train station, retail area, civic and cultural institutions, and Twin Pines Park; identifying locations and a program of activities for new public gathering places in the downtown; and turning the Belmont Train Station into a



gateway and an anchor for the City. The feasibility of some of these recommendations - changes to parking, streets, zoning, and land use policies - could be explored during the General Plan update process.

The Places and Urban Design Committee's Conditions, Values, and Trends Report focused on strengthening a series of shared community values which the Committee identified as part of both its Visioning and Station Area Project work with PPS:

- **“Strong connectedness** - The opportunities that a community creates for people to meet, share common experiences and restore mutual ties.” Opportunities for creating successful gathering spaces, some large some small, throughout the Village Center area were identified.
- **“Friendliness / Neighborliness** - Opportunities to celebrate local successes...and create relationships around a shared future.” There is a need for partnerships and collaboration to implement, on an experimental and permanent basis, the recommendations in this report.
- **“Someplace to go** - Physical places that are ... locations for meeting, sharing and experiencing local events and community.” The role of the Caltrain Station in fulfilling this need was explored.
- **“High quality of community life** - An awareness of the need to support, sustain and enjoy the...arts, education, open space and the natural environment.” This can be accomplished by establishing physical links to all of these resources and making them fully accessible to residents.
- **“Economic vitality** - A vital and financially thriving local economy.” Adding new mixed use buildings with ground floor retail, re-orienting businesses to be street facing, and bringing new retail to the train station area are strategies for accomplishing this.
- **“Appearance matters** - The look of the community - its identity, dynamism and well-being.” Suggestions for locations for gateway treatments and features, upgrades to sidewalks and streetscape enhancements, and working with local merchants to upgrade facades are included in this study.
- **“Encourage, embrace, implement constructive change** - A positive and pro-active outlook regarding ... change.” Incorporating the recommendations of this report into the General Plan Update will propel the planning process forward so that real change can be realized.

These concepts are referenced throughout the report, and help to set the stage for future planning efforts.



# PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process for this project was undertaken in conjunction with the Place and Urban Design Committee, a group of stakeholders convened to focus on issues of place and urban design in the village center as part of the citywide visioning effort. PPS facilitated the Committee's contribution to the Citywide visioning process as well as its development of the opportunities and recommendations presented in this report. Assisted by PPS, the Committee developed a Conditions, Values and Trends Report and a series of "Vision Themes," which were then incorporated into the final "Vision Statement," which has been adopted by City Council.

In the framework designed by the City of Belmont, Project for Public Spaces conducted its own Placemaking Workshops in order to assess existing problems and resources of the city and to come up with creative solutions. The study area included the El Camino Real and Ralston Avenue corridors, and the downtown core.

The planning process directed by PPS began with a kick-off meeting with town staff and the Place and Urban Design Committee to come to an agreement on goals for the project, identify key issues, and develop a strategy for dovetailing the Committee's Visioning work with their Peninsula Corridor Planning work. The planning process involved several key steps:

1. Literature Review: Belmont provided PPS with base maps and aeriols of the city, as well as planning information about new downtown development projects, traffic data, the Belmont Vision Update, and plans of new development in the downtown.
2. Placemaking Workshops: The purpose of these workshops, held on June 9 and 10, 2003 with City staff, representatives from SamTrans, Peninsula Policy Partnership, Caltrans, and the Place and Urban Design Committee was to identify issues of concern with regard to eight target areas in the Village Center area of Belmont:





**Site 1:** Intersection of Boulevard and El Camino Real

**Site 2:** Ralston Avenue between El Camino and the entrance to Twin Pines Park

**Site 3:** Ralston Avenue and Old County Road

**Site 4:** Belmont Train Station

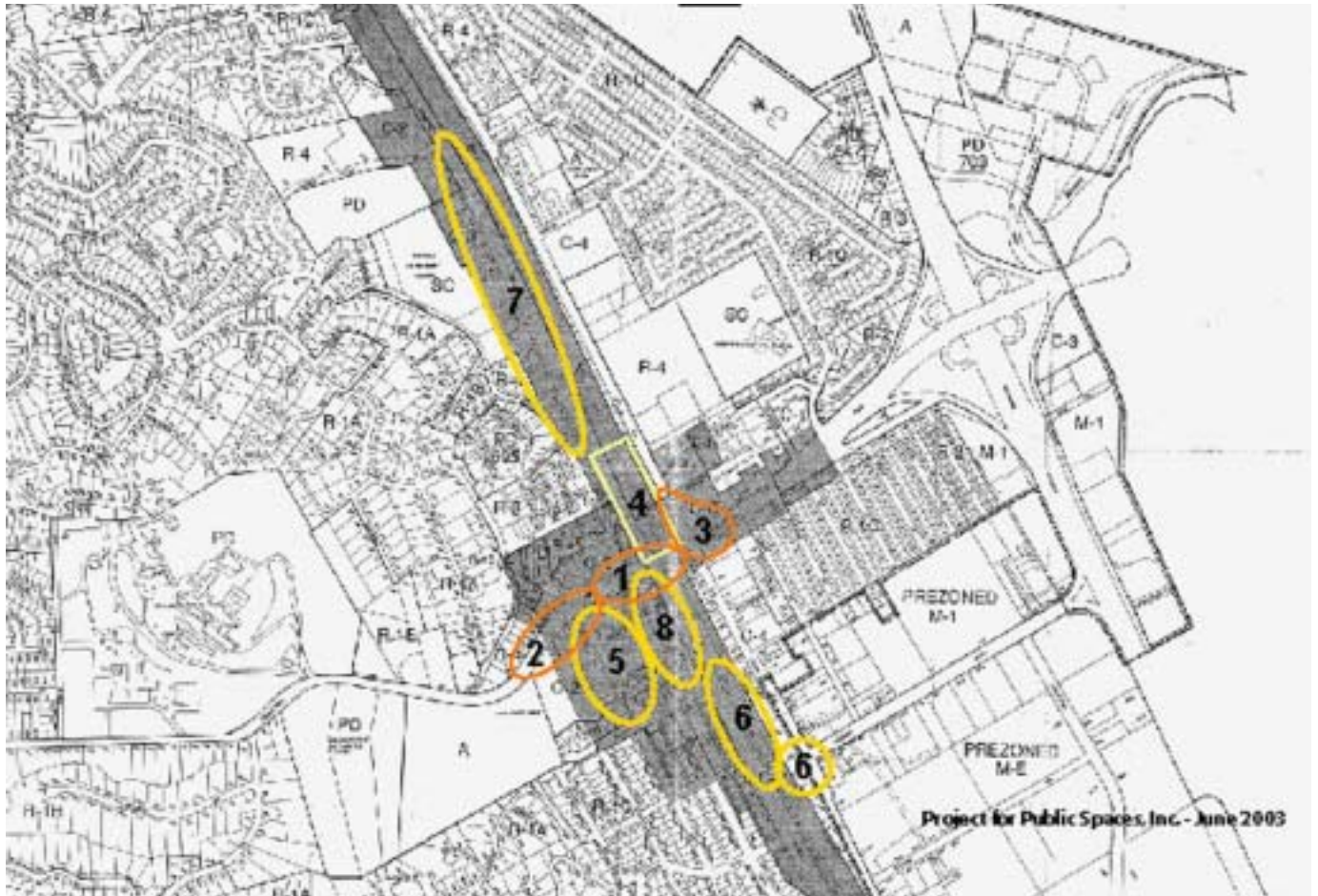
**Site 5:** Belmont Village between Ralston Avenue and Waltermire

**Site 6:** Sixth Avenue between Ralston Avenue and Waltermire

**Site 7:** El Camino Real between Emmett and Harbor Boulevard

**Site 8:** El Camino Real between Middle Road and the U-Haul building

3. Study Area Plan Technical Workshops: PPS summarized the specific key issues for more study and convened two technical work sessions to explore these areas in more depth, develop more specific recommendations, and create conceptual plans based upon ideas generated by the Committee. A third workshop was held in July to assist the Places and Urban Design Committee to complete the work required of them as part of the Visioning Process. At each of these Technical workshops, conceptual designs and recommendations represented in powerpoint presentations were further analyzed, reviewed, and prioritized from the point of view of their feasibility and potential impacts upon the downtown. Participation in the technical workshops was expanded to include relevant staff from SamTrans/Caltrain, Caltrans, and city staff.
4. Presentation of Recommendations: PPS's concept plans and a draft report were presented to city staff and stakeholders for review, comment, and revision in November 2003.



### Place Game Sites





## THE FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR A LIVABLE PENINSULA

### 1. Turning Transit Centers into “Places”

A rail station need not be just a place for transportation-it also can be a setting for community interaction, and a place that accommodates a diversity of uses and activities. By creating a welcoming presence, train stations can become focal points for a downtown as well as comfortable and convenient places for transit passengers. One goal of the effort in Belmont is to better tie the Train Station to the Village Center, and to make it easier and more comfortable for passengers to use.

### 2. Pedestrian Friendly Streets

The major traffic flow through downtown and around the Caltrain Station is channeled onto Ralston Avenue, El Camino Real, or Old County Road -- all three of which act as unfriendly dividers. This project is working with Caltrans and the City to focus on two of these streets as community assets -- El Camino as a boulevard, and Ralston Avenue as a "Main Street." The goal also is to provide more balanced access among pedestrians, cyclists, transit vehicles, and automobiles while maintaining traffic capacity and mobility.

### 3. Adding Housing to a Lively Downtown Mix

Improving the pedestrian environment around a station by fostering active and busy public spaces creates an opportunity to encourage an attractive and interesting housing environment. Building downtown housing units could be an important step towards fulfilling San Mateo County's goal of building 15,600 units by 2010. City center housing can also revitalize surrounding business districts, attract new businesses, and encourage the rehabilitation of older or historic structures-as well as spur new construction. These districts can develop identities of their own and can become popular places to live. Important complements to current and future local housing are the City's revitalizing retail core, Twin Pines Park and future, smaller plazas and public spaces proposed for the Village Center on what are now privately owned surface parking lots which, if consolidated, managed and reconfigured, could serve as sites for programmed activities, such as concerts, performances, and community events.

### 4. Access and Linkages

Transit facilities can generate conflicting demands among passengers who arrive by car, by bus, on foot, or by bicycle. In the past, decisions about improving access to transit stops and stations have largely focused on improving auto access, while pedestrian and bicycle access was not comparatively addressed. Also, roads and rails-when improperly and inflexibly laid out-can act as barriers and divide communities, thereby creating an imbalance in access of community members and merchants to businesses, services, activities, and customers.





*Vision for Plaza Park with passenger amenities, cafe, newsstand, and a shuttle drop-off that will serve area residents well as well.*



## TURNING TRANSIT CENTERS INTO "PLACES"

Because of its unique character, appealing to its local residents as "... a wonderfully safe and supportive place to raise a family," and its more regional character, appealing to existing and potentially new visitors, Belmont needs to have a first class train station. As described in the Place and Urban Design Committee's Statement of Conditions, Values, and Trends, the City already enjoys access to a "well-developed regional transportation network, which supports a variety of circulation needs. Mass transit is found in the heart of town at the Caltrain station and SamTrans bus routes."

The Belmont Caltrain Station represents a true, though underdeveloped opportunity to serve as a gateway and focal point for Belmont. Based on the Place Evaluation Workshop results, the train station already is considered to be an asset to the City, but it doesn't draw people to it; its parking lots are underutilized, its entrance is difficult to find; it feels isolated; the railroad grade separation is perceived as a blank wall that cuts the community in half; and bus stops are isolated and lack amenities.



## ISSUES



There is not enough lighting at or in the area around the train station and under the railroad overpass to make it safe feeling for passengers and residents. On the platform, there are comfortable seats, but not all the seating is sheltered. Transit signage is poor and the location of the stairs is not clearly identified. Little socializing or community activities (except the farmers market) take place here.

The area is felt to be walkable, but only after crossing El Camino Real. Sidewalks are narrow throughout the area and traffic moves very quickly. As a result, the entire area surrounding the train station feels dominated by cars (parking lots, El Camino). On the Old County Road side of the station, the vacant lot, slated to become a park in the future, is a barren place, without amenity or any kind of use.



Improving the station is area is complicated by the fact that Caltrain needs to preserve its right of way for future expansion to four track rail service. Caltrain would take 60 feet to build the third and fourth tracks, which would eliminate nearly half of the parking spaces in the lots south of the station building.





## OPPORTUNITIES

The number and locations of amenities provided at the station need to be enhanced, with weather protected seating added throughout the station, not just on the platforms. Additional lighting also is needed in the area under the underpass, around the stairs, in the parking lots and along the streets flanking the station. The newspaper boxes need to be cleaned up and or and replaced by a staffed newsstand. Short term parking added to the front of the station would allow for easier drop off and pick ups of passengers. New directional and informational signage directing people to Belmont's Village Center destinations was also suggested by workshop participants.

The bus stop on El Camino could be relocated at or near the station entrance to create a closer transfer between bus and train and to enable both bus and train passengers to wait in a more comfortable feeling, weather protected area.

The plaza area under the underpass has the untapped potential to function as an attractive public space. Creating a satellite retail area by placing a moveable kiosk or vending cart in the highly visible location currently occupied by the bike lockers (which could be moved to the back wall under the platforms and/ or replaced by bike racks) would give residents and passengers alike an opportunity to buy flowers, coffee, snacks or even get a shoeshine while passing through or waiting at the station. Local merchants could be contacted to gauge their interest in operating a cart at the station to serve passengers entering the station from neighborhoods to the east.

Expand management of the station area, which would help to enhance both its image and identity, include adding flowers in planters and pots to the landscaping around the train station, more regular watering of plant material, and changing the plant selection to include drought hardy varieties. The operator of the moveable kiosk or vending cart, mentioned above also could be contracted to provide on site management of the station area. Their duties could be broadened to include giving out city maps, bus schedules, train timetables, community information, and maintaining a community activity bulletin board.



*A kiosk selling food and beverages or a newsstand would animate the station area and would be a great resource for commuters.*



The City owned lot ("Plaza Park") on the east side of the station (at Old County Road and Ralston), should become an active park, with small scale retail, that also serves as a centralized shuttle turnaround (for Oracle) and a kiss n' ride. A turnaround designed as part of the park slated for this site, with a fountain and flowers, kiosk, and vendor, would create an attractive waiting and pick up area. A concierge service, for example, would activate this plaza as well. Such a service brings the services of local merchants to the station where they benefit transit passengers. For example, passengers drop off keys for duplicating, film to be developed, etc. with the concierge in the morning. The concierge fulfills these requests using local businesses, and then brings back the items to the train station for passengers to pick up on their way home. The southern end of this plaza park, along the Ralston Avenue edge, could be redeveloped to house a small business, such as a restaurant or café, that would serve both passengers and the community at large and animate the park.

The intersections of Ralston Avenue and El Camino and Ralston Avenue and Old County Roads should be transformed into downtown gateways that highlight and call attention to the train station. This could be achieved by narrowing the lane widths of the roadways leading to the station, bulbing out the curbs at the intersections, and installing highly visible paved or textured crosswalks to make it easier for people to reach the station on foot. In addition, a work of "gateway" art could be installed on the east side of the intersection of Ralston Avenue and El Camino Real, which also would help enhance the visibility and presence of the station. This artwork could be permanent or temporary. The City and Samtrans could share the costs of commissioning a local artist to create a new, or purchasing an existing, work of art for the station area.

## FUTURE PLANNING ISSUES

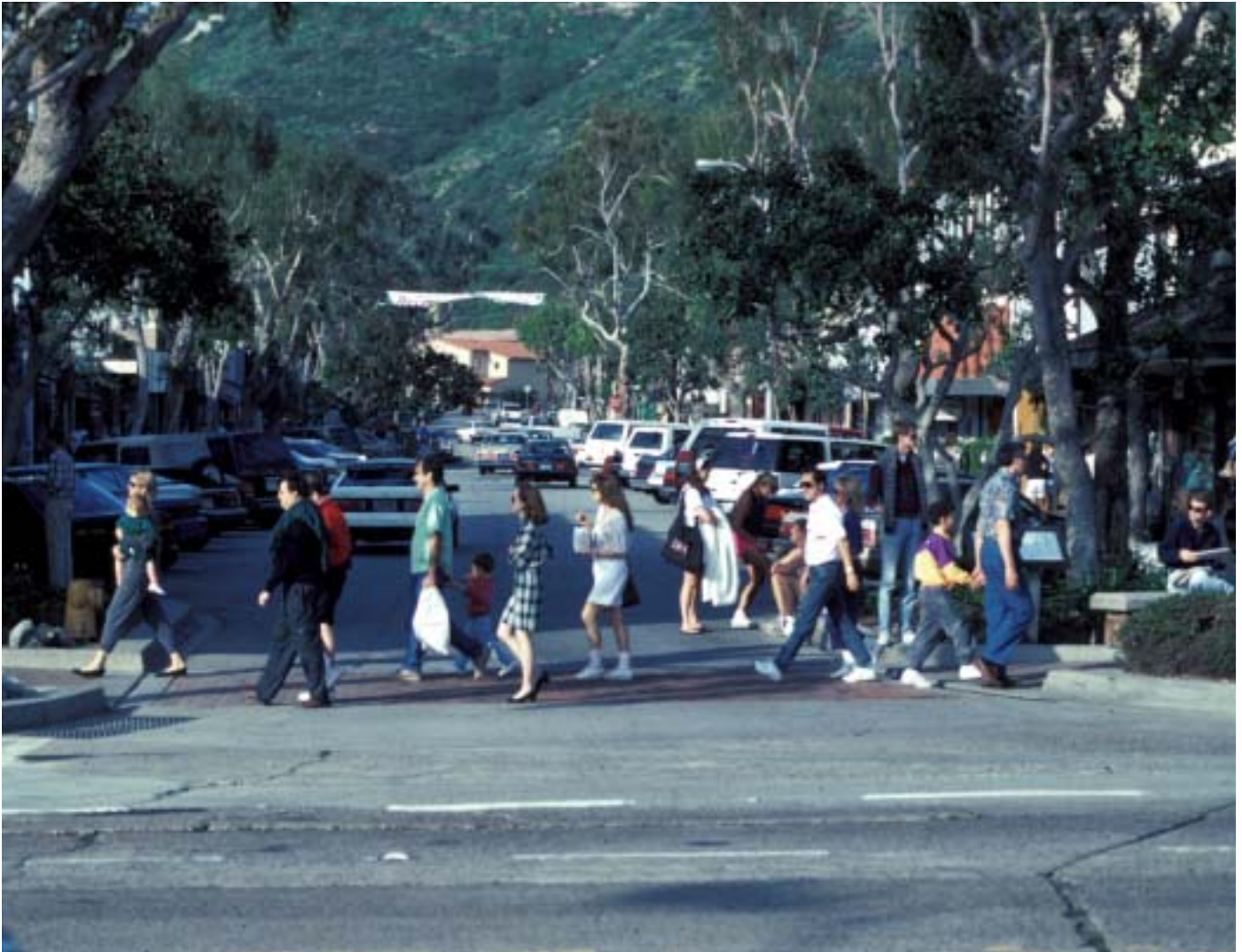
SamTrans/Caltrain's plans for the four track expansion at the Belmont Station affects how or whether the Caltrain parking lots could be used - either by the City or by SamTrans/Caltrain - as future sites for new mixed use development. That is, whether adequate square footage will remain to support the construction of multi-story mixed use development, or whether too large a percentage of the parking lots will be subsumed by the four track expansion to make anything larger than shallow one or two story retail possible.

The City and Samtrans should discuss potential funding sources for some of these improvements and whether these improvements could be added to the scope of work for the four tracking expansion project. The City and Committee should continue to discuss the qualities, design and optimal location of the proposed "gateway" treatment or artwork.

The Chamber of Commerce could assist the city in recruiting a vendor for the station, selecting the most appropriate kind of kiosk, working with the vendor to set the hours of operation - all of which will contribute to the success of vending in this location.







## PEDESTRIAN FRIENDLY STREETS

The visioning committees cited "easy mobility" as one of the most important priorities for the future of Belmont. Committee members would like to see "bicyclists, walkers, and other non drivers get where they are going easily" -- in comparison with the obstacles and safety risks they currently endure -- in order to circulate around town. They also claim that streets should be "safe residential streets" and traffic should flow along "smooth-flowing throughfares". This goal does not mean that roads should be endlessly widened. Wider roads with more lanes do not necessarily remove traffic congestion. In fact, just the opposite is true. According to researchers from the Federal Highway Administration and UC Berkeley, as cited in a Local Government Commission Center for Livable Communities Fact Sheet, "building new and wider highways actually creates more traffic - above and beyond what can be attributed to population growth. New road capacity draws motorists from more congested routes....and sparks new and longer trips." Moreover, "90% of all new highway capacity added to California's metropolitan areas is filled within four years, *and 60% to 70% of all new county-level highway capacity is filled within two years.*" A balanced mobility strategy maximize the utilization of the thoroughfares for all users, especially pedestrians. Perhaps the goal should be restated to bring people to Belmont, and therefore making planning decisions that are people-oriented not merely car-oriented.

Ralston Avenue is described in the City's vision statement as the place along which Belmont's "economy prospers with a mix of appropriate, attractive, successful businesses." It is therefore important to preserve and enhance its pedestrian features, to make the proper aesthetic choices at the street front level, and to encourage businesses to orient themselves out towards Ralston Avenue instead of turning their backs on the street, in order to render the shopping and strolling experience as pleasant as possible.



## ISSUES



Today, Belmont's small Village Center feels dominated by cars. Workshop participants talked about sidewalks which are narrow relative to street widths. On Ralston, the City's de facto Main Street, the street is four lanes wide, on average, but widens the closer one gets to El Camino to six lanes at the Ralston-El Camino Real intersection. Commercial development accommodates vehicles through the extensive use of parking lots (with uses set back from the sidewalk) and wide curb cuts - which interrupt pedestrian flow. Pedestrian crossings are often unsafe, and it is difficult to walk from one part of downtown to another. Moreover, the lack of adequate pedestrian amenities makes the environment even more unpleasant.

On El Camino, car traffic likewise dominates to the point that pedestrians are practically non-existent. The many underutilized and underdeveloped properties along the east side of El Camino, and the somewhat marginal businesses that line the west side, do little to encourage drivers to slow down or to stop in Belmont. As a result, people feel that the City "lacks desirable urban identity. Entering the community from outside by bus, rail, or automobile is largely an indifferent experience. There is an absence of a clear and distinctive identity to the community and its boundaries, with the exception of Alameda de las Pulgas at the San Mateo border. The downtown area at Ralston Avenue / El Camino Real / Old County Road does not convey a distinctive or memorable character."

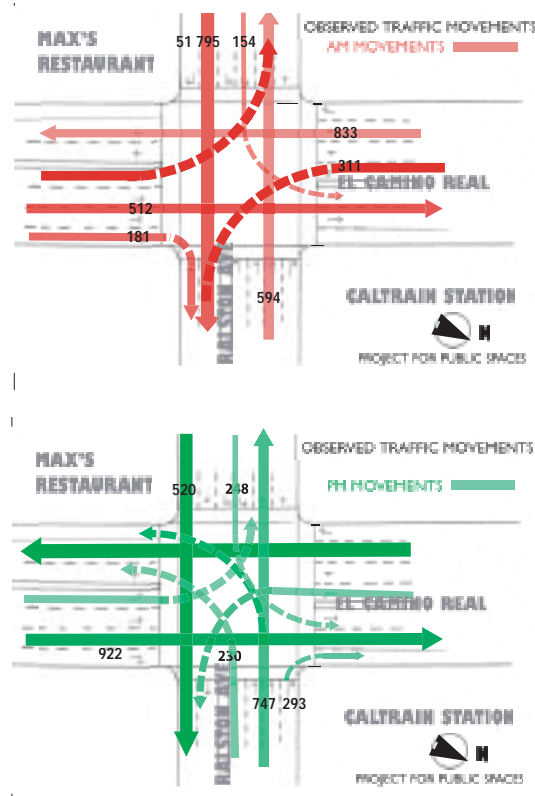
El Camino Real also separates the east from the west side of town. It was described as a "Chinese wall" that prevents people from getting from one side of town to the other; crossing is felt to be both frightening and dangerous. Even so, El Camino Real was recently widened even though some roadway space is unused or striped with lane widths of more than 15 feet average, and up to 25-30 feet in some locations. As a result, it encourages speeding. A failed frontage road experiment implemented between O'Neill and Harbor Boulevard was removed, but the curb was never realigned and widened. The curb lane here is 31 feet wide.

On El Camino, the goal should be to get drivers to maintain the speed limit of 35 MPH, rather than going faster, because faster speeds actually reduce the capacity of a roadway. A Local Government Commission Center for Livable Communities Fact Sheet cites the following statistic from the Transportation Research Board's 1985 Highway Capacity Manual: "The capacity of a lane of vehicle traffic is at its maximum at about 30 mph. As speeds increase above 30 mph, drivers increase the space between cars to allow for greater stopping distances" which reduces lane capacity overall.



SamTrans is also beginning to assess the feasibility of enhanced bus service on El Camino Real and to provide faster local transit service and reduce auto dependence for intra-Peninsula trips. This enhanced bus system could feature a variety of elements, ranging from low floor buses, real time arrival information for riders, and special shelters, to queue jumping lanes and signal priority systems that allow buses to get ahead of traffic at intersections. All in all, it would give new identity to bus service on El Camino.

The intersection of El Camino and Ralston Avenue - next to the train station - is the most problematic in the downtown. Here, additional left and right turn lanes have been added, and workshop participants talked about the great difficulty they face in crossing the street. Before changing the physical configuration of the Ralston-ECR intersection, however, further studies and traffic analysis should be undertaken. For example, PPS noticed that some of the traffic back up westbound on Ralston Avenue east of Old County Road in the evening is due, in part, to the lack of synchronization of the traffic signals at El Camino and Old County Road.



*Results of time lapse filming of the intersection of El Camino Real and Ralston conducted by PPS on March 19, 2003 during the morning and evening rush hours.*

# OPPORTUNITIES

## El Camino Real

In the long term ECR could become a renovated boulevard, connecting different civic entities, regional economies, and destinations to one another, while symbolizing the common history of the San Mateo Peninsula. In order to do that, a clear, coherent design vocabulary and long-term strategies need to be introduced. The benefits that each city along El Camino could reap are great: safer circulation for residents and visitors, an aesthetically pleasing road, and a more thriving regional economy.

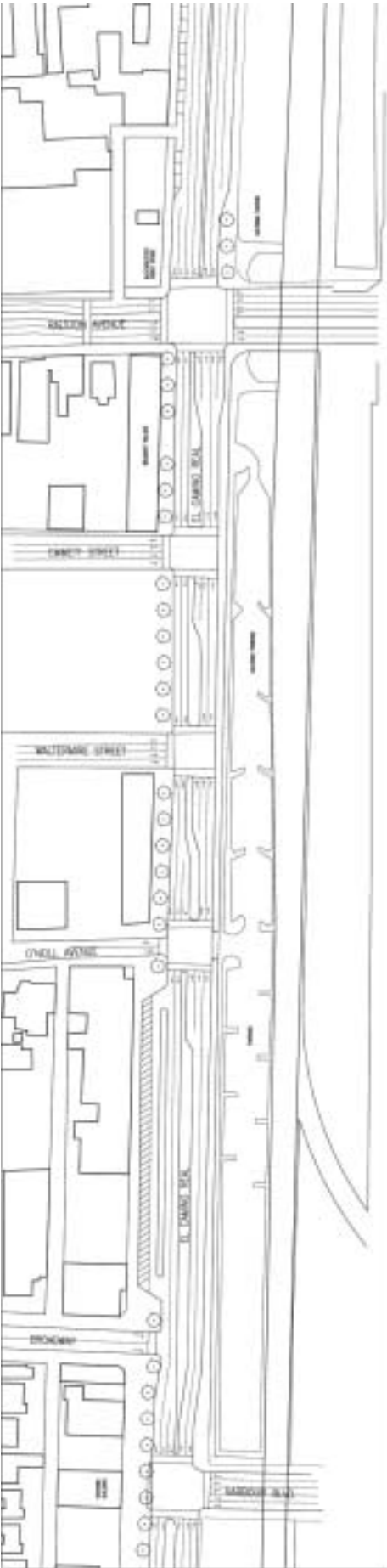
In Belmont, as in the rest of the other San Mateo Peninsula cities, El Camino Real could be reconceived of as a great street, designed to make efficient use of space and maintain traffic capacity:

- Efficiently utilize existing space for traffic by:
- Keeping the street two lanes in each direction throughout this area, with left turn lanes and extra turn lanes at Ralston Avenue and other intersections as needed. This is the standard lane configuration for most of El Camino Real within San Mateo County.
- Narrowing lane widths from 12 feet and wider to 11 foot travel lanes, with 12 foot curb lanes
- Reduce the number of curb cuts and widths of curb cuts through striping
- Redistribute this reclaimed roadway space to the sidewalks along the west side of El Camino and to a green buffer that could be added to the east side of El Camino. (When the train tracks are expanded to four track, the existing parking lot areas will be narrowed down to 40 feet wide, a point where they may not be suitable for redevelopment. This extra space could be dedicated to bus transit lane along the track wall in the long term, or a bike path in the short term.)
- Add on street parking where feasible, such as along El Camino south of Broadway down to O'Neill

Enhanced bus service is a possibility for El Camino, but more analysis is needed about how it could be integrated in Belmont. For example, the parking lane may be needed as a queue jump lane for buses at the Ralston Avenue and Harbor Boulevard intersections, and bus stop locations may need to be rethought. In any event, existing bus stops along El Camino should be

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*Reconfiguration of El Camino Real between Ralston and Harbor Avenue. The new design with 2 lanes in each direction and a center median will balance the flow of cars and pedestrians and become a gateway to the center of town.*





upgraded by adding seating and information , schedules, downtown maps, etc.

Finally, a new streetscape design vocabulary (plantings, street trees, lighting, and gateway features) should be developed to announce to motorists that they are approaching the downtown and the train station.

## Ralston

Ralston Avenue should become a more pedestrian friendly Main Street and achieve a better balance between vehicle and pedestrian circulation. Potential improvements could include:

- Reduce lanes to 11 feet (perhaps first on an experimental basis through striping). Use the footage gained to add space to sidewalks. Provide extra bulbouts at crossings to reduce the crossing width of the street. Introduce a low planted median where left turns are not needed.
- Consider special paving surfaces for left turn lanes on Ralston Avenue to visually reduce the apparent width of the street.
- Introduce a mid-block crosswalk across Ralston Avenue to connect future developments planned for the blocks between El Camino and Sixth (Ralston Plaza and the Atrium)
- Consolidate parking lots to make it easier to close curb cuts on Ralston. Minimizing curb cuts will also help to reduce auto to auto conflicts and allow for the introduction of a low planted center median.
- Introduce a gateway treatment, possibly in the median, along Ralston Avenue or on El Camino.
- Lengthen the busy bus waiting area in front of the Ralston Plaza development site on the north side of Ralston.

These same treatments should be extended to Ralston Avenue on the east side of the train station, which is one of the primary entrances to Belmont, even though the land uses which flank the road itself are more commercial and industrial than residential.

One of the longer term goals is for both sides of Ralston Avenue to "talk to" and relate to one another, to feel that they form two sides of a cohesive retail district. In order to achieve this, the south side of Ralston, west of Sixth, should be redeveloped in the long term in order to create a continuous street front along this side of the street. In the short term, a façade improvement program could be developed to enhance the attractiveness of stores on the street and make them more interesting to pedestrians walking by.





*A center median can be a planted strip as in these two Californian towns.*



## PROPOSED RECONFIGURATION SECTION

## OPPORTUNITIES

### Intersection of El Camino Real and Ralston

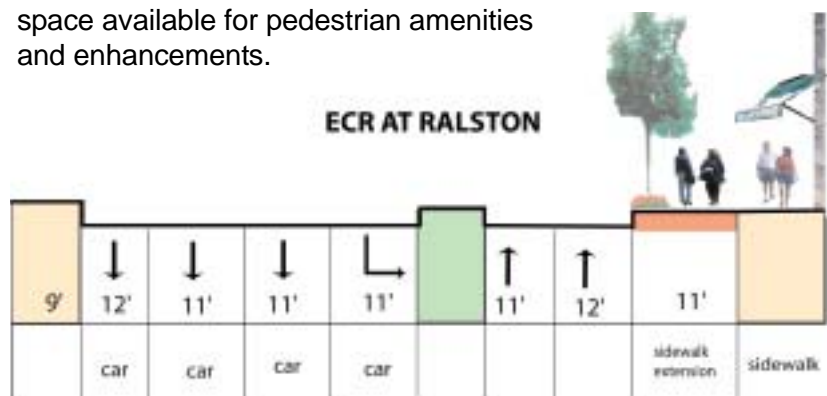
A detailed traffic analysis of this intersection should be conducted to determine the feasibility of the following improvements:

- Increasing the pedestrian crossing times at the lights across El Camino and Ralston
- Reducing the number of turning lanes from 2 to 1
- Introducing a low-planted center median. This could be painted in at first as an experiment
- Adding sidewalk bulbouts with pedestrian amenities
- Installing a gateway feature at this location

Harbor Boulevard might be used to help alleviate congestion at this intersection by serving as a potential alternative route. Because 30% of the traffic on Ralston Avenue is traveling through town between the 101 and the 92, Harbor Boulevard, which is currently underutilized, could be promoted to south-bound motorists as an alternative to Ralston Avenue to access the 101 southbound, thereby helping somewhat to reduce traffic volumes at the intersection of Ralston Avenue and El Camino.

With a more attractive intersection, there is an opportunity for businesses and the train station to relate better to the street. For example, adding new retail to the northwest corner of ECR and Ralston; connect Max's Restaurant to the street by opening up the wall and adding a staircase. A community information kiosk could be located at the northwest corner of El Camino and Ralston Avenue as well, to guide people around the commercial and civic center district.

Prior to making any roadway improvements, it will be important to conduct further analysis of traffic patterns and turning movements at the El Camino Real-Ralston Avenue intersection, one of the most heavily used intersections along the El Camino Real Corridor. Turning lanes at this intersection also impact Ralston Avenue in terms of the amount of street and sidewalk space available for pedestrian amenities and enhancements.



# FUTURE PLANNING ISSUES

From its time lapse film analysis, PPS counted a total of 248 cars using the two northbound turn lanes on Ralston Avenue at the intersection with El Camino during the evening rush hour (4 to 6 pm) and 154 cars using these two turn lanes during the morning rush hours (7:00 to 9:00 a.m.). During these same periods, 520 cars used the east bound through lanes on Ralston Avenue in the evening, and 795 cars used the through lanes in the morning. Traffic counts provided by the City of Belmont from March 19, 2003 (see diagrams on page 23), show 220 cars using the turn lanes between 5 and 6 pm, and 311 cars between 8 and 9 am. Similarly, in the evening, the through lane carried 767 cars and in the morning, 833 cars used it. The possibility of removing one turn lane and making the remaining turn lane a combination left turn/through lane is supported by this research, but warrants further study.

## PROPOSED RECONFIGURATION PLAN



## EXISTING CONDITIONS









## ADDING HOUSING TO A LIVELY DOWNTOWN MIX

"Belmont prides itself on being unique". One of its main characteristics as noted by the Places and Urban Design Committee is "its small-town ambience" that "sets it apart as a tranquil, safe and desirable place to live". The Committee however, points out in its Statement of Conditions, Values, and Trends that while "the City has committed itself to a 'village character' in several downtown plans over the years, these plans have not been implemented effectively. Lack of public support for implementation, economic factors, and political disputes may have all been factors, but the on-going effect is that the village atmosphere has been only partly realized."

The city of Belmont has also been described as a "wooded residential areas surrounding a charming, vibrant town center". In order to make the town center even more livelier and able to support both the residents living outside of downtown and a more a transit-oriented population living in the downtown, a new cycle of investment needs to occur. Development opportunities should be pursued in downtown Belmont, in the areas around the train station and along El Camino Real -the main connector of people, ideas and business at a local and regional level. Introducing more mixed-use retail with housing also would help to strengthen the city's fabric.



## Mixed Use Development

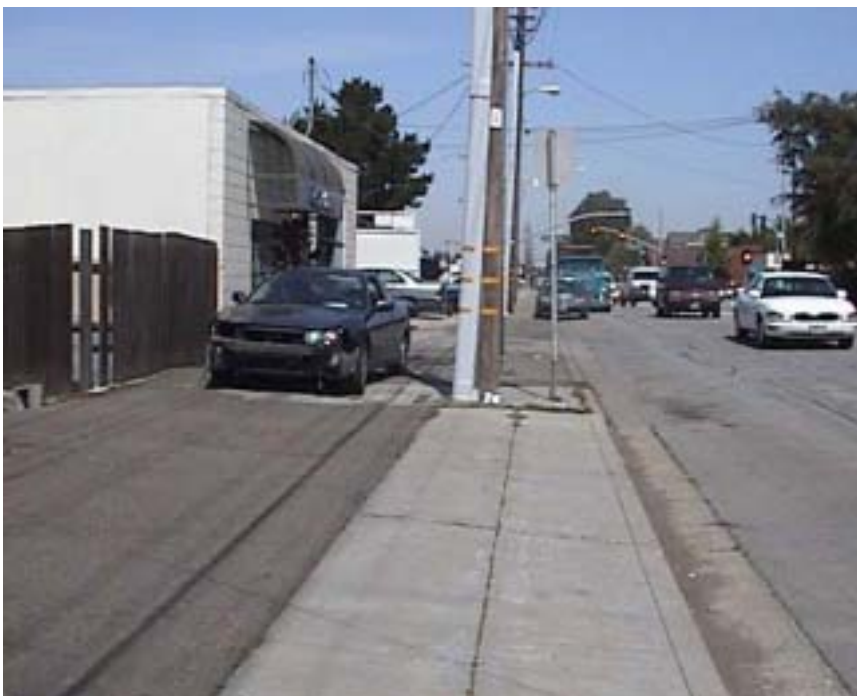
Underlying Belmont's urban (commercial) districts are the suburban, strip-corridor patterns dating back to the 1950's. As described in the Conditions, Values, and Trends report, "buildings are stretched out along El Camino Real, Old County Road and Ralston Avenue without an integrated plan. Retail and office uses are not arranged to provide synergy or to minimize vehicular use / travel times." Many properties are under-utilized and unattractive. The surplus of retail and office space in the City's commercial keeps leases low and makes property owners more inclined to accept low-rent tenants.

At the same time, housing stock in Belmont has not grown significantly in the past decades, but prices have skyrocketed, as they have throughout the Peninsula. Housing for the city's workers, elderly and new-forming households is largely out-of-reach. New opportunities for housing are challenged by the cost of land, materials, financing, and regulatory controls. There is an interest in seeing more mid price "move up housing," for families to buy - somewhere between renting and \$800k housing prices, as well as housing for empty nesters and young professionals.

Introducing transit-oriented housing along El Camino, between Harbor Boulevard and Emmett and in the area north of Middle Road, could support Belmont's efforts to create a vital, affordable, mixed-use commercial district, because it would contribute new residents who could become potential customers for shops and businesses and who would take advantage of the excellent transit access. In this way, housing can revitalize existing business districts; attract new businesses, and encourage the rehabilitation of older or historic structures, as well as new construction. It should be noted that new development is not entirely theoretical. A non-profit housing developer, Mid-Peninsula Housing Coalition, had already expressed interest in the redevelopment of the block between Broadway and O'Neil, for example.



How this new development is designed and integrated into the downtown was often raised in workshops. From PPS's perspective, there has been more of a "project" rather than "place" oriented approach to development. While there are many new projects planned and underway in downtown Belmont, there doesn't seem to be cohesiveness in shaping or synergizing the place impact of one upon another, nor reviewing these projects within the larger context of "shared circulation, reduced parking, block-level village planning," according to the Committee's Statement of Conditions, Values, and Trends. As a result, nearly every commercial building in Belmont is internalized, with entrances located off of a parking lot or a courtyard. There are few entrances leading directly out to the street. The latest building that reflects this trend is the expanded City Hall. The result is a lack of "critical mass" needed to create a vibrant downtown.





## OPPORTUNITIES

Expanding retail opportunities and diversifying the retail mix in Belmont was a theme that came up repeatedly in workshops so that, one day, the Committee's statement - "we look first in our own shops and restaurants for what we need-and usually find it-" will ring true more often than not. Attracting more businesses to Belmont is needed in order to stimulate and support a vital local economy as well - and to better serve audiences like students from Notre Dame de Namur University (who must live on campus for two years) who can come downtown without driving. In fact, the University has chosen not to provide much in the way of commercial or support services (such as a big campus store).

It was also discussed that Belmont needs to become more business-friendly by supporting local property owners in such a way that they can rent their properties to the kind of retailers Belmont hopes to attract; becoming a new employment center and making it easier for new businesses to open, and for existing businesses to thrive and expand.

Workshop participants identified a number of sites where mixed-use infill projects with affordable housing could occur with a change in zoning regulations and the participation of land owners and developers.

- El Camino Real: El Camino, especially if the road was re-designed as a boulevard, has many potential sites north of Middle Road that are suitable for retail, residential, and uses like a satellite medical center and museum.
- Ralston Avenue: smaller infill sites may be available along the south side of the street.
- Ralston Avenue: east of the train station on the north side of the street where it could replace the existing low density one story commercial buildings and parking lots
- Caltrain parking lots east of El Camino Real: these are prime locations, depending on whether or not sites of suitable width remain once the four tracking is complete.
- Retail along the western edge of El Camino, south of Ralston, to create a continuous streetwall. This would require purchasing the eastern most row of parking spaces in the Safeway parking lot.
- East of Old County Road to 101, south of Ralston



Additional planning is needed to determine the feasibility of new mixed use development for the downtown. More research is needed to determine the market for different types of new housing, office and retail that would be important components of new mixed use development. Research would evaluate



different markets sectors (empty nester, student, young professionals) as well as housing types (apartments, town homes, lofts, etc.).

In addition, the vision for the scale and character of new development should be broadly discussed. Participants in workshops discussed a general vision of apartments over retail shops scaled to preserve Belmont's small town feel, where residents would walk more and only require one car. This reflects an important factor for new development: parking requirements. With underground parking expensive to provide, and surface parking an inefficient use of valuable land, parking ratios can affect the feasibility of housing as well as its scale. Reduced parking requirements due to proximity to transit reflect the advantages of downtown housing where households do not have to have two cars. The scale of new development affects developer feasibility as well. For example, in neighboring San Carlos, three to four stories was usually viewed as minimum to make a project financially feasible on land next to the train station given land and development costs.

Future mixed use development regulations should encourage pedestrian activity. Current regulations tend to encourage low density (one-story), set back buildings with parking in front of them. Future development will promote walking and a livable pedestrian environment only if a zero lot line policy is adopted that requires building up to the property line, and if design guidelines or standards are created to ensure that attractive and active uses are programmed for ground floors of all new commercial buildings in the Village Center.

Creating a downtown that is active after 9 pm is a long-term goal, to draw new restaurants and entertainment to the area, reinforcing Belmont's image as college town. The types of businesses that are desired include those that would promote Belmont's local identity, such as smaller scale retail like boutique shops, and new restaurants; attracting businesses that would help develop a (local crafts) market niche market(s) such as artisan shops (along Old County Road), an ironworks, glass shop, marble shops, ceramics and potters that would have a retail presence or collaborate on creating a storefront cooperative in the workshop spaces along Old County Road; businesses serving students, including restaurants and entertainment; and businesses that primarily serve local residents, such as a good breakfast place.

In order to implement the recommendations in this section, and to create the kind of management entity that will be needed to oversee these improvements and to work with the City to implement others described in this report, Belmont should



consider setting up a Business Improvement District, for the Village Center and/or the El Camino corridor, the latter being where most of this new mixed use development will be located. Now commonplace in California and other states, a Business Improvement District (BID) is a special area in cities defined by state and local legislation in which the private sector delivers services for revitalization beyond what the local government is providing. The property and/or business owners within the legally constituted district pay a special tax, or assessment, to cover the cost of providing services or facilities for which a downtown or commercial district has a particular need, such as additional street cleaning, graffiti removal, signage, streetscape improvements, security patrols, promotional events and marketing of local businesses.

Large BIDs (common in cities like New York and Philadelphia) can become almost their own governments, branching out into economic and community development. Smaller BIDs tend to take on roles once played by chambers of commerce or merchant associations.

BIDs are formed for a number of reasons:

1. To reverse negative image. Since an area's overall image affects the individual businesses within it, a BID can provide tools for changing a negative image or existing negative conditions. A district can also provide unified marketing programs to communicate positive changes.
2. To provide services the city cannot reasonably provide. Most commonly such services include sidewalk sweeping and pressure washing, trash removal, graffiti removal, landscaping maintenance, special events, etc. Each BID gets to decide its own priorities and address them accordingly. For example, in Manhattan Beach, CA the BID's activity plan includes parking and transportation improvements - developing a valet parking service, wayfinding and improved traffic and pedestrian flow. This BID also planned on generating funding for a shuttle service to and from parking lots, studios and key residential areas.
3. To generate financing for and implement capital improvements. This is especially true concerning streetscape improvement such as sidewalk treatments, benches, light fixtures, unified signage, landscaping, trash receptacles, etc.



4. To attract new business and investment. Business retention and recruitment programs are often included in BIDs activities along with professional marketing and promotions and individual businesses may not be able to afford.
5. To establish private sector control and accountability. Districts are generally accountable to those who pay the tax or assessment. In addition, improvements and services provided by the BID are subject to private sector performance standards and controls.
6. To create a unified voice for the District. BIDs advocate on behalf of downtown businesses allowing them to communicate a unified message to local governments on issues of importance to the district. In addition a BID can create cooperation among competitive businesses allowing them to engage in activities they would not be able to do on their own.

Business Improvement Districts, especially when located in areas where most businesses rent vs. own, and property owners have little involvement or are absentee, have come up with a variety of funding solutions. Often districts that are not property-based function on a membership basis, with member businesses and companies paying dues commensurate with their revenue. Funding from the local government/city is also used to finance BIDs, especially for new, small BIDs with many new businesses that cannot shoulder the burden of sufficient additional tax to finance the district. Special events are also used to raise money for BIDs ranging from membership luncheons, and social mixers, to street festivals, golf tournaments, Taste of Downtown events and award ceremonies. Some area merchants seem very capable of assisting a BID in the start up phases to reduce costs. There is, however, a need to initiate a collaboration among the City, property and business owners, and merchants to develop the scope and budget for any new BID.

The general plan update needs to further address the vision for

## FUTURE PLANNING ISSUES

mixed use development in the downtown and the planning regulations and implementation strategies to address this vision. The degree of density and building heights that residents are willing to accept of course is a key concern. However, the issues should be broadly addressed to not just "density" but the how new residential uses can preserve a small town center and support the vision for "charming and vibrant" village center.

How to implement this vision should also be more fully addressed. For example, the possibility of purchasing the air rights over the Caltrain parking lots as sites for multi-story mixed use buildings (on parking lots that will not be used as part of track expansion) could be explored and other owners approached with potential development sites. Planning mechanisms, including designating redevelopment areas, should be further explored. Development guidelines for specific overlay districts are another mechanism that can help create the kinds of development that residents want to see.

Feasibility studies for new housing development should be conducted in preparation for the master plan update. A market also analysis should be conducted to begin to generate a list of the kinds of retail that is missing from Belmont currently, retail that would attract customers to Belmont who don't already shop there, the target trade area, etc. The City could then tailor a retail recruitment strategy and other mechanisms designed to attract the most highly desirable new businesses to the downtown.



### Parking And Circulation

"Our actions today make Belmont even lovelier for our grandchildren" is one of the more poignant comments to emerge from the visioning process undertaken during the Summer 2003. Parking is an important component of "lively mix" because it currently is such a dominant land use in the downtown. In fact, parking lots account for the largest percentage of "public space" in downtown Belmont. As such, it is indeed very important to evaluate how the existing parking lots can be made more efficient to enhance the character of the downtown -- rearranging and "hiding" it in key areas in order to achieve a livelier, pedestrian character.

As the Statement of Conditions Values and Trends cited, recent circulation improvements, such as "traditional street-widening and parking lot development have triumphed over efforts to create a local, small-town feel. The widening of El Camino Real, the creation of stand-alone parking lots, the weakening of the city's old street grid have imposed an out-sized suburban pattern to the downtown area" making intimate village place-making more difficult and actually eroding the downtown fabric.

In addition, new development projects have all provided, or been required to provide, their own stand alone parking lot. The key parking lots in the Village Center are individually owned and managed: Belmont Village Center owns the parking lots between El Camino Real and Sixth Avenue, another lot belongs to the Doctors building, a third to the Steventon Building, and then there are the parking lots surrounding City Hall and Twin Pines Park.

These parking areas are rendered less efficient by being either restricted for customer use only or isolated from the city's commercial district (i.e., CalTrain parking lots, which often sit almost empty). Because the vast majority of customers and clients reach these businesses by car, many commercial buildings and even retail businesses are designed to that their entrances face onto their parking lots, rather than face the street. There is little coordination between lots, which conform to the constraints of a particular parcel, and fences and barriers frequently separate one lot from another. Shoppers going from shop to shop wind their ways through the lots and on occasional pedestrian paths, or get back in their cars and drive their next destination, even if it is within walking distance.



## OPPORTUNITIES

The city should consider creating a city-wide parking management district and that puts management of parking lots and meters under the control of a municipal agency or authority. This would allow for better coordination of both types of parking (all day employee vs. short term shopper, for example) as well as allow these uses to be controlled. Once parking becomes publicly managed, it could all be metered, for example, with proceeds paying for the management of the parking lots themselves, as well as perhaps downtown beautification and amenities. Parking authorities have the additional ability to bond for capital improvements for lots and parking garages.



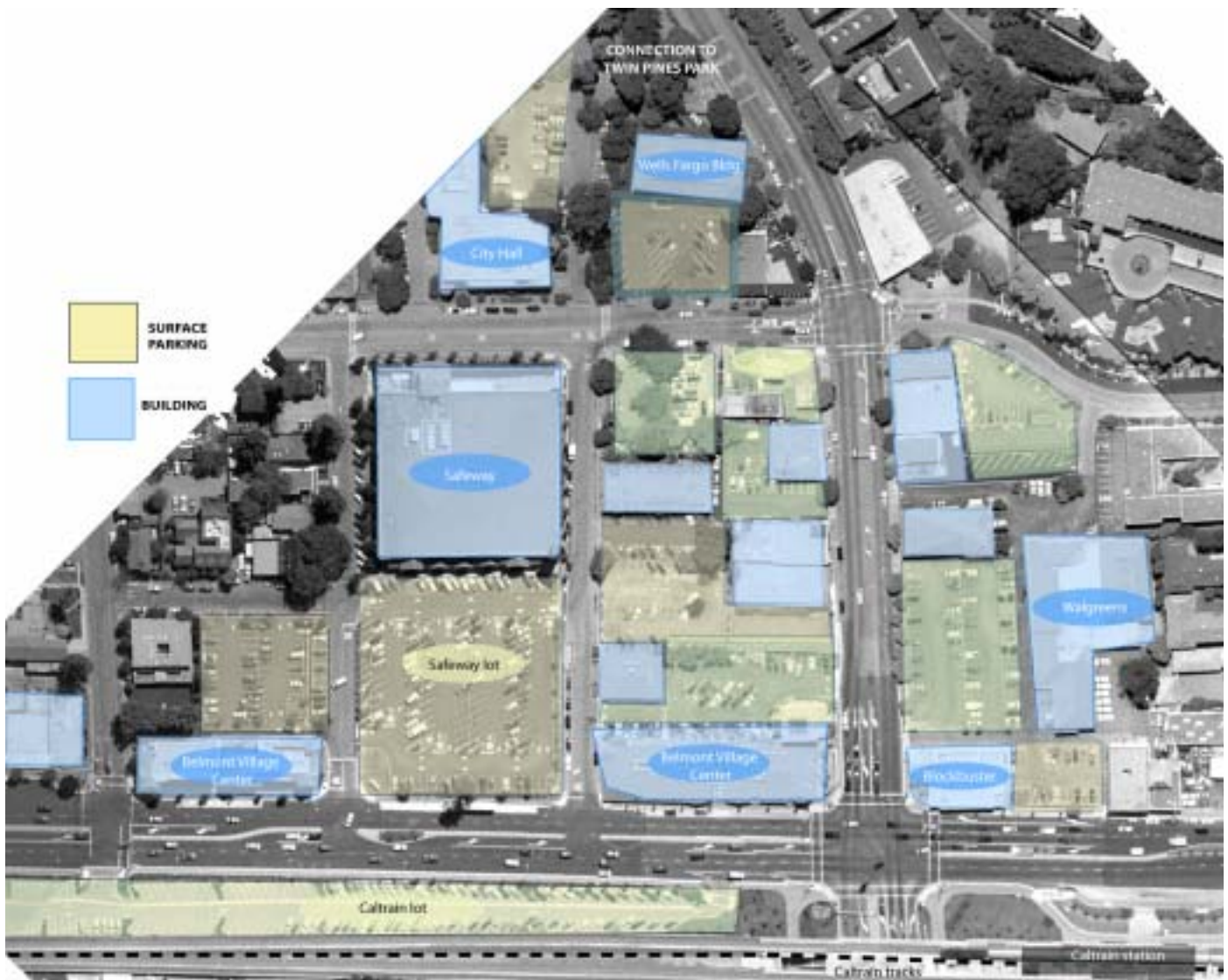
Existing parking lots could then be reconfigured and consolidated and pedestrian paths added through them to improve efficiency of use and pedestrian flow. This in effect would create a series of "pocket parks with parking" or "pocket parking" - interior parking lots with walkways, landscaping, and improved lighting.

To make better use of underutilized parking lies on the east side of El Camino Real next to the train station, a shared parking arrangement could be developed with Caltrain. Caltrain parking lots could be used for all day employee or short term shopper parking, freeing up customer spots closer to retail shops and for community activities and public use, even on a temporary use. Caltrains parking lots could also be used to leverage a reduction in parking requirements for new development (for example, additional parking for residents beyond their one parking place per unit) as well as a means of promoting transit as a way of getting to town.

## FUTURE PLANNING ISSUES

Developing a shared management approach should be a collaborative process if at all possible, involving private parking lot owners, Caltrain, and the City. This would allow parking regulations for new development, particularly senior housing, mixed use, student housing, and housing within one quarter mile of the train station to be reduced to one space per unit with an additional parking space made available in a shared-use site.

Design guidelines for parking facilities also need to be developed, with recommendations that parking be placed behind or tucked under buildings to create a continuous street-wall, minimize curb cuts and provide more opportunities for businesses to share parking lots, rather than placed in front of buildings facing the street, which is a more suburban parking model not well suited for a walkable small town center.





## Public Spaces



Belmont residents "connect to each other in all kinds of gathering spaces". In spite of such community connectedness and recurrent social activities, Belmont needs to improve the physical layout and articulation of its public spaces. The importance of creating a civic space as a center of the city has been expressed by many of the committee members who live, work, or visit Belmont on a daily basis. Such new, lively spaces would be instrumental in strengthening Belmont's social and civic presence along the Peninsula by promoting exchange of ideas and experiences because "our strong sense of community and enjoyment of the town's assets and activities deepen as we become better informed and connected." Moreover, Twin Pines Park has been identified across the board as a place full of potential and as a symbol of Belmont's civic identity. A place that can "...inspire us to play, create, and contemplate."

While Belmont does have a number of public gathering places - namely Twin Pines Park, Belmont Library on Alameda de las Pulgas, the Post Office on Masonic, the Sports Complex on Island Parkway, the stage theater on the Notre Dame de Namur University campus, the Carlmont Shopping Center, and even the CalTrain station to some extent, they do not contribute to the creation of a "singular civic identity." This is due in part to the fact that these places were neither planned nor developed in order to serve multiple audiences, or to provide a flexible enough venue to accommodate numerous, diverse activities.

As a result, there is no central gathering place in the Village. Moreover, with all of the barriers created by streets and parking, there is no network or 'necklace' of existing and potentially new public spaces in the downtown that link together. Workshop participants clearly identified the need to create places that give people "some place to go and something to do" and that activate the downtown.



# OPPORTUNITIES

A new opportunity for downtown is to create a small but lively central square. This central square would function as a civic campus (wind protected, sunny and warm). Uses for this civic square could include retail, places for residents to gather, outdoor dining, book sales from the library (to give the library a downtown presence), jazz concerts, serve as a gateway to the park, and as a venue for such events as an expanded art and wine festival.

The preferred location for this square is part of the site currently occupied by the Wells Fargo Bank. This centrally located space, between Sixth Avenue the "Main Street" portion of Ralston Avenue and City Hall, could function both as a new civic gathering place and a gateway to Twin Pines Park that also would serve to link the park to the neighborhoods. Public artwork, art exhibits by Twin Pines artists, seating and lunchtime performances are some of the features that could be incorporated in to this plaza. Streets surrounding this square would be narrow and lined with shops, and would give priority to pedestrians, through cobbling and texturing designed to slow traffic while accommodating it. (This would require purchasing the site from Wells Fargo and removing the building and adding new retail development onto the site currently occupied by the gas station to create an active edge to the plaza.)

While Twin Pines Park is a place of passive repose, new uses, programmed activities, and destinations - building on the current mix of arts activities, civic spaces, and will encourage more people to use it. In addition, the connections between the park and the community, particularly the entrances and the entryway signage, need to be improved to make the park's presence more keenly felt. It is thus important to:

- Activate the park with additional programming and events
- Increase lighting in the park
- Add paths through the park that connect to the downtown and to the University/Carlmont area
- Remove the solid fencing around the Ralston Avenue side of the park to make it more transparent
- Traffic calm Ralston Avenue in the vicinity of the park to facilitate pedestrian crossing
- Provide trails and paths through the park that link up with the adjacent neighborhoods.
- Create a series of smaller plazas/ gathering spaces throughout the commercial area, connected to one another through pedestrian friendly crosswalks and intersections, bike paths etc to weave a new civic identity into the city's fabric. A "necklace" of small gathering places could be



carved out of and link up through the many surface area parking lots in the Village Center, forming a series of interlocking public spaces next to retail. [See Diagram, page 43] Potential locations were identified across the downtown, including Emmett Street, leading from the Safeway parking lot to Sixth Avenue, the plaza planned for the front door of the Walgreen's store, which could be relocated onto the northern edge of Ralston, and the sheltered patio at Starbucks, which could be replicated in other locations next to restaurants and eateries along Ralston Avenue and El Camino, and sited so that they connect to both the street and the parking lots.



*Blank walls along the Caltrain tracks can be turned into a community art piece and beautify the neighborhood enhancing its identity.*

- Introduce more art and public art from community into the Village Center area. Temporary exhibitions, rotating and permanent public art could be sited in each of these public spaces and a self guided walking tour of these artworks could be designed, which would draw people, on foot, through the Village Center.





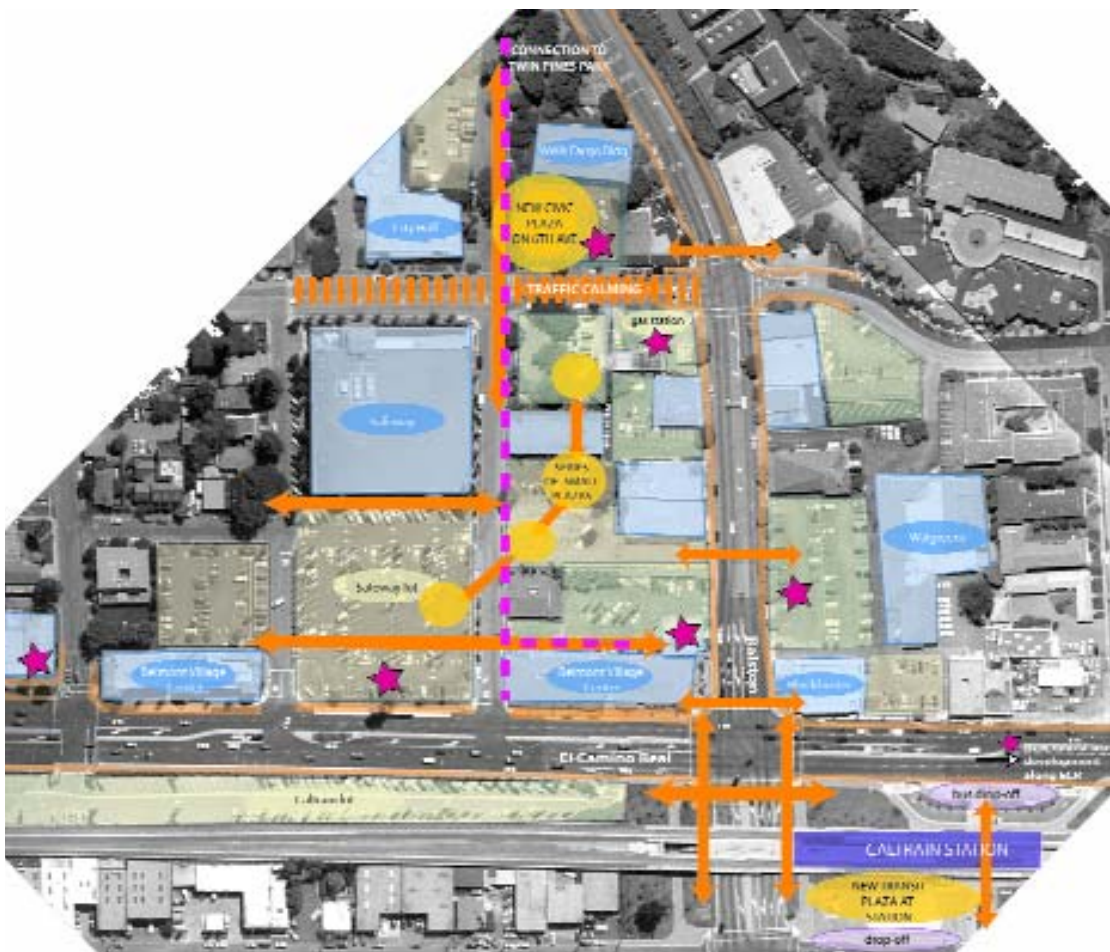
# FUTURE PLANNING ISSUES

How these public spaces can be created will be a major challenge in future planning. Can sites be purchased by the city? Should the city use eminent domain through a redevelopment agency? Should public spaces be mandated in private development? Can a reconfigured private development, say at the Wells Fargo site, accomplish both a new public space and private development?

This planning effort also need not specify where many of the "necklace" of public spaces should be created. As noted, as part of the master plan update, different urban design configurations should be explored for the downtown which look at new development potential, reconfiguration of parking lots, and provision of public spaces.

Finally, as part of the master plan update, different urban design configurations should be explored for the downtown which look at new development potential, reconfiguration of parking lots, and provision of public spaces. These urban design schemes should look both at currently developed areas (like Safeway) for infill development, as well as areas (like El Camino Real) where substantial new development is possible.

## Belmont, CA CONCEPT DIAGRAM







## ACCESS AND LINKAGES

Achieving a balanced approach means strengthening the linkages among the City's many civic destinations and making them more accessible on foot or bicycle while improving the pedestrian connections among these destinations, the train station, and the Village Center so that the City's numerous public resources and institutions become even more central to community life. It also involves "shrinking distances," by eliminating the barriers to improved access which may make it physically difficult or time consuming to reach destinations on foot that are actually quite close to one another. This is very compatible with the Place and Urban Design Committee's stated goal of "easy mobility" as one of the most important priorities for the future of Belmont. Committee members would like to see "bicyclists, walkers, and other non drivers get where they are going easily."

There are numerous institutions and facilities in Belmont that residents feel proud of: "Our schools and universities are the pride of the region...our library and athletic fields are of high quality and in high gear." Such public resources are, according to the Places and Urban Design Committee "valued, but scattered." In their Statement of Conditions, Values, and Trends, the Committee explains that "the community and its many public and private institutions have actively provided for and carefully conserved a variety of public resources - Twin Pines Park, Belmont Library, City Hall, NDNU, Barrett Community Center. However, they are treated as individual projects often at existing locations. New, modernized, or reconstituted public resources could be located in closer proximity to each other to create civic identity, community connections and 'critical mass' for an urban place, but this is rarely considered in Belmont."

With this vision in mind, a series of pleasant experiences could be created that take people through downtown, from neighborhoods lying to the east of the railroad tracks to the Village Center and neighborhoods west of El Camino Real. A strategy for reclaiming Ralston Avenue as a City street, making this key corridor, between Route 92 and 101, as pedestrian and shopper friendly as possible needs to be devised as well; improving pedestrian crossing of El Camino Real at Harbor Boulevard and Ralston Avenue is key to this strategy.

## ISSUES



While the community cherishes Belmont's "village atmosphere," a number of the things that people expect in a Village are currently lacking, including easy-to-cross streets without significant traffic noise and fumes; wide and generous sidewalks. El Camino and Ralston Avenue have already been discussed in detail, but the same deficiencies apply to other streets in the downtown that have less traffic (such as Old County Road and Harbor) - and therefore even more opportunity.

In addition, the basic infrastructure needed to support safe, multi-modal access through the Village Center is inadequate. Directional and informational signage is lacking, there are no dedicated facilities for cyclists, and a community shuttle service, which could provide car-free access for hillside residents and Notre Dame de Namur students from their homes to the train station and shopping is not in place. Consequently, important facilities are not as accessible as they could be. For example, the entrance to the signature Twin Pines park is poorly marked and pedestrian links from the park to surrounding community are discontinuous.

# OPPORTUNITIES

New signage - directional, informational, community, etc. - and community information kiosks - introduced at the northwest corner of El Camino and Ralston Avenue and at the Station, would serve to guide visitors and residents to the many civic and recreational destinations in an around the Village Center. For example, the location of the entrance to Twin Pines Park would become more visible with better signage.

Introducing community shuttles (similar to the Scoot shuttle in San Carlos which carries 9,000 riders per month) locally circulating between the train station, Village Center, and residential areas should be explored. Shuttles could offer service connections that would reduce traffic volumes on Ralston Avenue and offers students, employees, and residents an alternative to driving

A dedicated bike path, which can be used jointly by cyclists and pedestrians, could be added onto the sidewalks west of Twin Pines Park, and on the roadway in the vicinity of NDNU. This bike path would form the spine of a system of "urban paths" or "urban trails" that lead from Carlmont to Notre Dame de Namur University, across Ralston Avenue through Twin Pines Park, to the train station and the Belmont Sports Complex, and then westward, across Ralston Avenue to the San Juan Hills. West of South Road, the bike route could be made of decomposed granite, and 10 to 12 feet in width where possible. It should be distinctive and identifiable as a bike route. The routing of the bike lanes would be "destination based" so that they would connect a series of places to one another -- connecting a necklace of public spaces -- yet also would create safe, alternate routes for cyclists. For example, cyclists could be directed away from the very busy and dangerous two blocks of Ralston Avenue (west of El Camino) and lead along Sixth to Waltermire or Emmett, or up through the Park and City Hall area. Bicycle racks would need to be installed at these key locations and additional sheltered bicycle parking should be provided at the station.

Downtown itself should be a comfortable network of pedestrian sidewalks and paths that connect major destinations. This can be accomplished by:

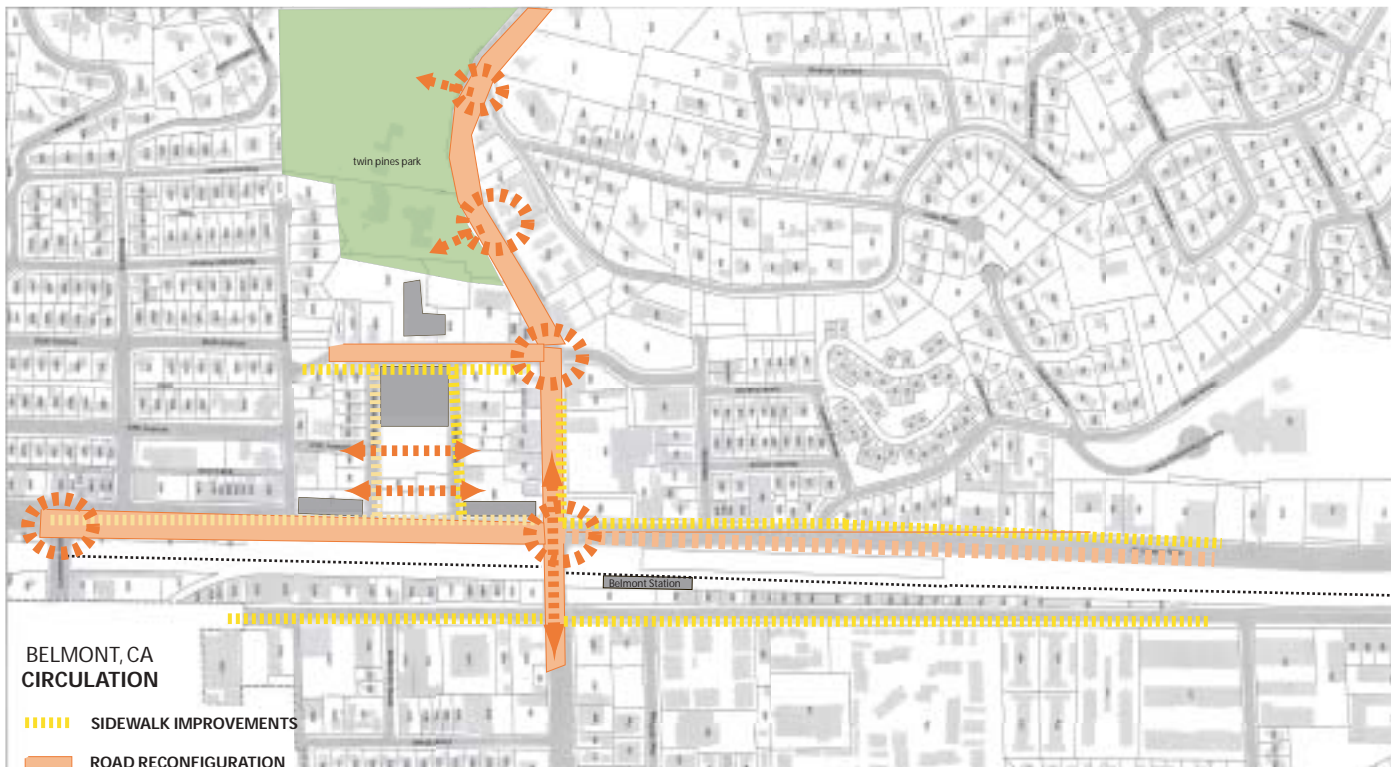
- Widening and repairing sidewalks
- Adding new sidewalks, such as through the Safeway and other parking lots so people no longer have to dodge moving cars, thereby reducing vehicle and pedestrian conflicts







- Minimizing curb cuts throughout the Village Center to reduce pedestrian/auto and auto to auto conflicts
- Creating bulb outs on all four sides of key intersections throughout the Village Center to accommodate pedestrian flow and to narrow crossing distances.
- Adding light-activated, paved or cobbled, texturized crosswalks (like at San Francisco City Hall) to the intersections of:
  - El Camino and Ralston
  - Across Ralston Avenue at the entrance to Twin Pines Park to reduce the amount of jaywalking across Ralston Avenue in this area and to provide a safer connection to the Park from the residential neighborhoods north of Ralston.
  - Across Ralston Avenue between the Ralston Plaza and the Atrium complex on the south side of Ralston
- Creating short, direct pedestrian paths and walkways through parking lots, by removing walls and hedges and by improving signage.





## FUTURE PLANNING ISSUES

When thinking about linkages, it is imperative to consider the City of Belmont from a holistic point of view, as a whole, connected place, perfectly able to accommodate different type of users, not only families living in residential areas, or commuters traveling to or from the state highways, but also a population of seniors, students, workers and commuters who sometimes cannot afford a car but are nevertheless a lively part of the diverse character of the city. A shift from a car-only oriented to a more comprehensive transportation planning strategy that includes accommodating bicycle lanes, shuttles, pedestrian routes, and buses is necessary in order to create the streetscape and pedestrian environment that both encourages and accommodates people walking through Belmont.

Identifying the best locations for and design of bicycle lanes and routes needs to be undertaken in cooperation with cycling advocates and the populations that cycle the most (NDMU students, for example), particularly the feasibility of purchasing easements so that bike paths can be off-street west of South Road.

Belmont also should consider applying to Samtrans/Caltrain for a Community Shuttle, similar to that which has been successfully deployed in neighboring San Carlos, to provide a shuttle service that can be shaped to serve community mobility needs.

All of these efforts will, over time, help Belmont to achieve its vision of being well connected, where "the many treasures of Belmont have pleasant and effective links between them. The many walls have come down. Getting from one end of town to the other, whether on foot, bike or by car is an enjoyable experience...The circulation patterns within Belmont make sense, and tie in well with links to other communities."



# IMPLEMENTATION

## Partnerships

Key stakeholder groups and partners suggested to help implement the Opportunities above and study and determine the feasibility and phasing of the longer term improvements are as follows:

- Business and property owners
- Business tenants
- Caltrain
- Caltrans
- Chamber of Commerce
- City of Belmont
- Developers
- Homeowners Associations
- Landlords
- Local architects
- Local artists
- Notre Dame de Namur University
- Organizers of the farmers market
- Safeway and other major property owners
- Schools
- Senior citizens and Youth Organizations

## A. Putting It All Together

Implementation of the short and longer term recommendations outlined in this report will have to overcome a series of obstacles, namely what the Places and Urban Design Committee have characterized as the City's "historic failure of public will in public place-making" and its "failure to follow through on planning." The City has been down this road before. Several downtown plans have laid out ideas and suggested policies that would support the creation of public gathering places and would strengthen the commercial center of the city, but the community has not shown significant support for these efforts in the past. At the same time, the City has failed to implement its own plans, many of which ended up being watered down or key ideas eliminated because they were considered too costly to implement (such as creating a public plaza as part of the Safeway project).



The proposed concept plan for Belmont's Village Center demonstrates how the key ingredients of this plan work together:

- A train station that functions as a community public space - on both sides of the station entranceway, with amenities and activities that make it more comfortable and enticing to transit passengers and a management presence responsible for its upkeep and beautification. Four tracking that improves transit service so as to attract even more Belmont residents to ride the train, and that provides opportunities to fund and implement recommendations in this report, including creating a landscaped buffered edge along the east side of El Camino, and providing space for new multi-story mixed use development with housing;
- A series of public spaces, some large some small, some created by consolidating surface lots, all linked to one another and connected to the city's many civic and retail destinations, cultural and natural resources, providing safe pedestrian and bicycle access and routes through the Village Center;
- An El Camino that no longer simply functions an arterial for funneling cars, but provides improved pedestrian crossings and enhanced streetscape features, including street trees and widened sidewalks and where properties along it become viable locations for new housing; and
- A Ralston Avenue that serves first and foremost as Belmont's Main Street and which communicates the unique flavor and character of the town to everyone who turns onto it from El Camino.

This vision is a bold one that can have a dramatic impact on the revitalization of Belmont's downtown, as well as on how Ralston Avenue and El Camino Real can begin to reflect and support the context through which they pass while supporting the creation of new mixed use, residential, and commercial districts.

## B. Implementation Roles & Responsibilities

The implementation of the recommendations outlined in this report relies upon the mutual and ongoing cooperation among the following entities (listed in alphabetical order), many of which have already been involved in discussions to identify desired uses for public spaces and new downtown development projects, and enhancements around and connections to

the Caltrain station, Samtrans bus stops, and Belmont's commercial districts and residential neighborhoods.

## 1. City of Belmont

The City of Belmont, of course, is a primary player in this initiative, and is responsible for coordinating with and managing the participation of all the others. The City also will take the lead in updating the General Plan. It is anticipated that a number of the recommendations discussed in this report could be achieved as part of this general planning process were the City of Belmont to:

- Work with Caltrans to research and evaluate various possible improvements to El Camino and Ralston Avenue
- Work closely with the Chamber of Commerce to promote positive partnerships between local businesses and the City
- Partner with landlords, and property owners to facilitate attracting new kinds of businesses to town
- Work with Notre Dame de Namur University to promote the City to its students and to become an active downtown partner
- Plan with SamTrans/Caltrain how best to fund the desired improvements to the station area that compliment and support the needs of residents and transit passengers alike as part of the four track expansion
- In the General Plan Update, consider reducing parking requirements; changing zoning ordinances, rezoning for higher density and/or introducing a zoning overlay district; all of which will help to attract developers interested in building mixed used, transit-friendly projects
- Investigate how best to create a municipal parking authority or parking management district. An early step could be discussing with Caltrain the possibility of arranging for shared parking at the currently underutilized Caltrain lots.

## 2. Caltrans

Caltrans is committed to transforming El Camino Real along the length of the Peninsula, which has entailed the DOT's involvement in community workshops in all seven Peninsula Corridor Plan cities and has familiarized engineers from the District 4 office with the Context Sensitive Design and Placemaking process. Caltrans can assist Belmont City staff with implementing and evaluating the experiments and short term changes recommended for El Camino and the Ralston/El Camino Real intersection as described in this report, as well as conduct feasibility and traffic studies as needed.

In addition, based upon SamTrans' emerging long range plan to introduce enhanced Bus service throughout most of the peninsula, along El Camino Real, Caltrans can work with the City of Belmont and SamTrans to shape a roadway configuration for El Camino that will both accommodate bus service and the pedestrian friendly improvements described in this report.

### 3. Local Merchants

Local merchants should work closely with each other and with the City on the wide variety of initiatives outlined in this report, that they can undertake to achieve the vision of a livelier downtown and to improve revenues for the businesses and the City:

- Business and property owners to upgrade building facades
- Business tenants to maintain their properties and improve store signage and window displays
- Work with the City and Caltrain to find retail uses for the train station area

### 4. SamTrans-Caltrain

- Coordinate plans for enhanced bus service and the four track expansion with the City and seek funding for the station improvements recommended in this report
- Improve existing bus stops along El Camino with shelters, seating, signage, lighting, and landscaping

### 5. Other Community Partners

- Homeowners Association to support & communicate benefits of traffic calming, biking and walking
- Local Architects and Artists to highlight unique characteristics of Belmont through artworks, exhibitions, and historic preservation efforts
- Safeway and other major property owners to support and participate in a parking management district
- Schools, Senior Citizens, and Youth Organizations to assist with programming of new public spaces and the park.

## C. Next Steps

During the workshops and technical working sessions, a series of recommended improvements for implementation in the near term were identified under each of the categories outlined in this report. These suggestions were deemed to be fairly easy and inexpensive to implement, without requiring a lengthy planning process, or as an experiment to be evaluated before longer term changes are made.

Recommended short term improvements to the Caltrain Station and station area include:

- Introducing satellite retail at the train station by working with the Chamber of Commerce to identify local merchants interested in operating a vending cart or a moveable kiosk at the train station.
- Increasing the number, and improving the location, of amenities provided at the station, such as adding more benches and lighting under the platforms near the station entrances, and upgrading bus stops along El Camino by adding seating and information.
- Samtrans and the City partnering to hire a station manager to handle day to day operations and maintenance of the station area.

Some experimental roadway changes that could be made in the short term include:

- Striping in widened sidewalks and medians, new crosswalks and neckdowns at intersections throughout the downtown as recommended throughout this report.
- Lengthening the pedestrian crossing times at the lights across El Camino and Ralston Avenue at certain times of the day as an experiment, in order to obtain the right balance between vehicle priority and pedestrian priority at key downtown intersections.
- Harbor Boulevard could be promoted to motorists immediately as an alternative to Ralston Avenue for accessing the 101 southbound.

A number of improvements could be made to the existing downtown streetscape and public spaces:

- Improve the directional signage along ECR
- Introduce community information kiosks around the downtown
- Create a small but lively central square in the downtown using the two city-owned lots along Sixth Avenue
- Activate Twin Pines Park with additional programming and events



- Increase lighting in the park
- Add paths through the park that connect to the downtown and to the University/Carlmont area and that link up with the adjacent neighborhoods
- Remove the solid fencing around the Ralston Avenue side of the park to make it more transparent

Studies that could be initiated include:

- Market study to explore the market for loft housing for artists and artisans
- Feasibility study for adding housing off of Davey Glen Road to Central School
- A service route study for a community shuttle should be undertaken before a grant application is submitted
- A parking occupancy/vacancy study to identify abuses of parking regulations as well as inefficiencies within the downtown

Policy changes and agreements that could begin to be discussed in the very near future include:

- Introducing an overlay zone / rezoning to allow for higher density/ floor area ratios
- Reducing parking requirements for new development within ½ mile of the train station
- Discussions regarding how best to create a downtown parking district
- Financing of student and senior housing with a 1:1 parking/unit ratio
- Creating a shared parking arrangement with Caltrain to allow Caltrain parking lots to be used for all day employee parking

A committee should be convened or the existing Places and Urban Design Committee encouraged to participate in discussions to resolved the "hot button topics" identified under Future Planning Issues throughout this report, and the trade offs they require vis-a-vis achieving the larger goals envisioned for the downtown.

